

Introduction

Blue crabs are harvested commercially and recreationally in South Carolina, primarily using crab traps, often called pots. Blue crab is one of the primary commercial species statewide, accounting for approximately 10% of the total value of all commercial landings. This report provides an update on the 2005 status of blue crab in South Carolina. Previous status reports up to 2004 are available at <http://www.dnr.state.sc.us/marine/>.

Commercial Fishery Harvest

Blue crab landings have historically been the most stable of all the state's commercial fisheries with landings averaging about 6 million lbs since 1979 (Figure 1). Commercial landings of blue crab in 2005 totaled 4.32 million pounds, well below the long term average but consistent with landings since 2002. A slight drop was seen in value from the previous two years at \$3.41 million and a decrease was also seen in unit value. The decline in total catch may be largely explained by reduced price per pound being paid during fall, which resulted in less fishing effort during that season (which has historically been the period of highest landings).

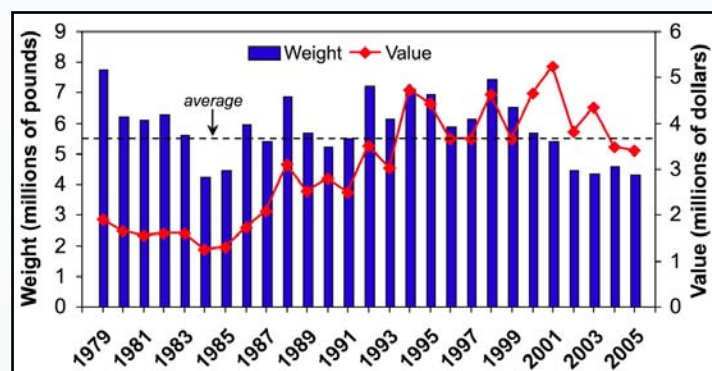


Figure 1. South Carolina commercial hard blue crab landings and values, all gears.

Hard crab licenses in South Carolina have fluctuated in accordance with prices and crab availability. The number of licenses sold over the past few years has remained fairly stable; however a decrease was seen in the number of resident licenses sold in 2005.

Since May 1997, crabbers have been required to license the number of pots they wish to fish. There was an increase in

Table 1. Number of SC hard blue crab licenses.

Year	Resident	Non-resident	Total
2001	380	8	388
2002	401	9	410
2003	410	7	417
2004	428	6	434
2005	386	7	393

the number of pots licensed through 2004, perhaps reflecting concerns fishermen have about discussion of potential regulations to limit fishing effort; however, a field count of actual pots in use in August 2003 and reported pot use from fishermen suggests that only about 1/3 of the pots licensed are fished. In the 2004-05 season approximately 33,000 crab pots were licensed in South Carolina which represents a slight decrease from previous years (Figure 2). This decrease was accompanied by a decrease in reported fishing effort. The mean number of crab pots fished daily decreased by 39%, 50%, and 33% in September, October, and November, respectively, from 2003 to 2005.

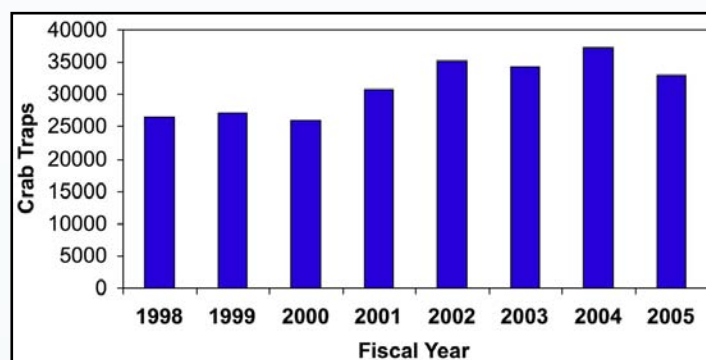


Figure 2. Number of licensed commercial crab traps in SC.

Softshell Crab Fishery

About 67,000 pounds of peeler crabs were landed in 2005, exceeding landings from the previous three years. However, the increase in landings was small compared to the increase in total value. Total (\$ 332,000) and unit values (\$4.93/lb) in 2005 were among the highest recorded since 1979.

Recreational Crabbing

In 2005, a survey of licensed recreational saltwater anglers was conducted by Responsive Management, Inc. for SCDNR Office of Fisheries Management. This survey indicated that 28% of respondents participated in recreational crabbing and spent an average of 9.3 days crabbing within the past 12 months.

Fishery Independent Sampling

Numbers of blue crab in SCDNR trawl samples began to increase in December of 2003, and continued through spring of 2004, indicating an apparent recovery from the low levels seen in 2001-2002 during the prolonged drought (Figure 3). Overall numbers through 2005 were still less than the decade-long average, although the fall crab potting survey yielded the highest number of mature female blue crab taken since its inception in 1988 (Figure 4). This bodes well for spawning stocks in 2006. Numbers of small blue crab collected in December have increased in recent years coincident with improved numbers of mature female crab taken in subsequent months (Figure 5).

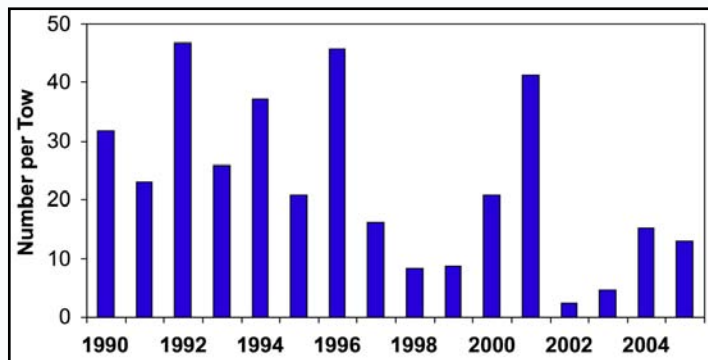


Figure 3. Number of blue crabs per tow in fishery independent trawl sampling by SCDNR.

Overall Condition of the Stock

Blue crab stocks have recovered from the low levels observed during 2001-2003; however, landings and fishery independent sampling indicate that stocks are still below the long-term average. Low commercial landings appear to be primarily related to the impact of poor market prices that has resulted in a decline in fishing effort. Anecdotal reports from spring 2006 suggest the number of spawners have returned to historical highs.

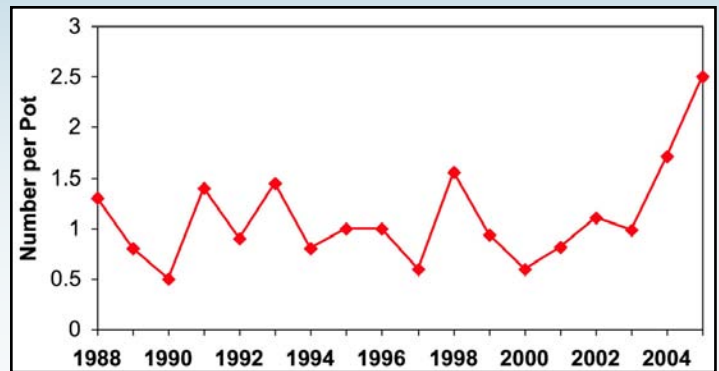


Figure 4. Number of legal-sized female per pot in SCDNR sampling.

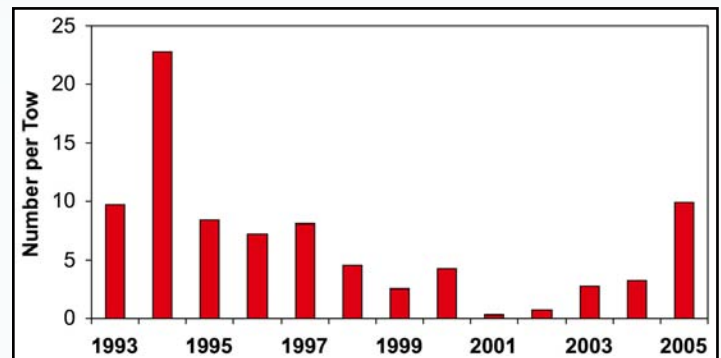
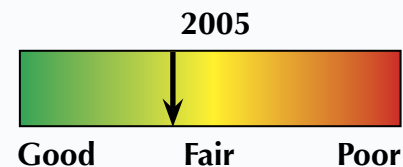


Figure 5. Small crabs (<75 mm carapace width) taken in 20 foot trawl tows in December.



Legislative Updates

Legislation proposed for introduction in 2006 represents the culmination of deliberations begun in 2002 in response to public concerns over blue crab stocks during the severe drought. Among the proposed changes are: limiting new license sales until the total number of crab pots has been lowered to targeted number, a one-bushel per person per day recreational limit, a separate "peeler" pot license, and an experimental trotline fishery in some designated areas during future droughts.



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